

Schools of Character

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Everyone Counts ■ Beyond the Classroom ■ It's Cool to Serve

Ask the experts

Demographics Should Not Determine Destiny

More than half of all students attending public schools in the United States are now eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. That compares to only 30 percent in 2000. A recent study commissioned by the Educational Testing Service reported that income-based achievement gaps between students now surpass racial-achievement gaps.

HOW CAN TEACHERS HELP BRIDGE THOSE ACHIEVEMENT GAPS AND BEST SUPPORT STUDENTS AFFECTED BY POVERTY?

Interview with Bob Woodson



Bob Woodson is the founder and president of the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise (CNE). He has dedicated his life to helping low-income people address the problems of their communities. His wife is a teacher, and he hears first-hand from her that teachers are seeing more challenges than before.

Q. What are some suggestions you have for classroom teachers?

A. Teachers need to always be on the lookout for signs of promise. We, as a society, tend to approach children in poverty as problems to be dealt with rather than as assets to be developed. For example, my wife had a child in her classroom who was a good artist. All the other children gathered around to see his art. She began to use his talent to help others. Teachers should always look for children's strengths and showcase them in some way.

Teachers should also ask parents about their children's strengths, gifts and talents. So often parent-teacher conferences focus on the child's classroom struggles and don't go beyond that to look for the child's potential and strengths.

Teachers should also find out what the parents' strengths are and identify ways for parents to contribute. Maybe they have a job they could share about on "volunteer day." Maybe they play an instrument or are good at telling a story. Children in poverty so often get to see wealthy volunteers brought in. How powerful it would be for them to see their own parents featured in their classrooms.

Q. What's the most important thing a teacher should remember?

A. It all starts with your attitude. Instead of referring to students as "at risk," we say "at promise." Teachers need to hold their students who are in poverty to high standards. It's important to be honest and not lower the bar for students just because they

are poor. The worst thing we can do is to pity poor people and feel sorry for them. It is easy to become despairing and cynical about prospects for change, but if we nurture students' strengths and potential, it can make a difference.

Q. Most teachers want to help. Can you give any examples of times when well-meaning people went astray?

A. The biggest mistake is having a rescue mentality. We need to stop treating children like they are refugees who need to be removed from their circumstances and instead focus on indigenous solutions. For example, I once saw a Christmas party, in a women's shelter where wealthy donors gave gifts for the children. At the party, everyone was happy except for the moms. The kids got their gifts, the donors got the satisfaction of giving, but there was no role for the parents. The next year the executive director changed the agenda and developed a system in which the moms could earn vouchers for toys by taking on various responsibilities at the shelter. At the next Christmas Party the moms could take their kids "shopping" among the donated gifts by using their vouchers. They felt empowered being able to purchase gifts for their own children rather than watching them receive charity: the gifts had deeper value than just toys.

Q. Anything you'd like to add?

A. Classroom teachers cannot do it alone. Home visits are good, but schools need to supplement their teachers with community liaisons. I don't mean more professional counselors, but surrogate parents. These would be full-time paid positions who come from the same cultural and geographic zip codes as the students. They serve as moral mentors and character coaches. The CNE has violence free zones, and we sometimes use ex-gang leaders as mentors and coaches, hall monitors and as a resource in the room to help teachers with control. They can be very effective because they understand where the students are coming from.

Q. What's one resource you'd recommend to teachers?

A. My book *Triumphs of Joseph, How Today's Community Healers Are Reviving Our Streets And Neighborhoods*. It is full of uplifting stories and examples of success that may inspire teachers.

Interview with William Parrett and Kathleen Budge



Dr. William Parrett is the director of the Center for School Improvement & Policy Studies and a professor of education at Boise State University. His research on reducing achievement gaps, effective schooling practices for youth at risk and low-performing schools has gained widespread national recognition. Dr. Kathleen

Budge is an associate professor and the coordinator of the Executive Educational Leadership Program at Boise State University. She has led this innovative, nontraditional program to develop leaders who have the commitment and capabilities to lead schools where all students succeed.

Q. You both write a lot about addressing the needs of students in poverty from the school and district level, but what advice would you give to the classroom teacher?

A. Kathleen and I always encourage educators to embrace the notion that whatever is good for kids who live in poverty and attend high poverty schools is good for ALL kids... and that particularly means high expectations, high quality instruction and powerful learning. We often hear from leaders that sometimes schools with “pockets” of poverty can be more stubborn to move or change. That said, the same principle applies: if any school successfully applies the three action areas of our framework for ALL kids, significant improvement will follow. It’s hard work and often can be very difficult to refocus a school on the needs of the students over the ‘wants’ of the adults. And if it’s more of a challenge to ‘avoid’ stigmatizing kids, then it’s work that needs to be done.

Q. What’s the most important thing a classroom teacher can do?

A. The most important thing any classroom teacher can do is get to know the students. Get to know their needs, their assets, their strengths and their families. Really get to know who they are as people. And then work to meet those needs.

We have noticed three interwoven practices that are common at all the high performing/high poverty schools we have researched.

- A. They all use questions to drive their work. They use high leverage questions. They question the way things are done. They make school a safe place to ask questions.
- B. They all make intensive use of data, and they make sure that the data is accurate. They work to understand data about achievement, about behavior; they even keep track of data on communication with parents.
- C. They focus on relationships. In our latest research we interviewed two groups of teachers—those who grew up in

poverty and those who are thought of as highly successful with students who live in poverty. Both groups of teachers are explicit about building caring relationships with their students and among the students.

There are various ways to build relationships. Some teachers pre-learn their students names before the first day. Others make it a fun mission to know all of their names by the first or second day—even high school teachers who may have 150 students. One teacher told his students he wouldn’t give any homework until he could name every student.

These teachers typically spend the first week or two of the school year doing team building and community building. They can get criticized by some administrators for their pacing scale, but they know that when they get the classroom community built, they will easily catch up. The time spent on building those relationships is worth every minute.

Q. I think most teachers care about building positive relationships, but isn’t there more they need to do to help overcome the achievement gaps, since many students who come from poverty are already behind academically when they start school?

A. Absolutely, it isn’t enough just to build relationships. Closing achievement gaps begins with beliefs. One key to overcoming the achievement gap is to help teachers challenge their mindsets and hold high expectations for all students. Teachers need to believe that children from low-income households can learn, and they can learn from a constructivist approach, rather than a tightly controlled approach that emphasizes memorization and low-level thinking.

Too many schools still have what Martin Haberman described as a pedagogy of poverty. When you compare some assignments at high socioeconomic schools with low SES schools, you will see some disturbing differences. Too many teachers have the attitude, “I won’t expect too much of you if you don’t give me any trouble.”

What gets in the way are our own mental maps of people who live in poverty. We have to support teachers to challenge their biases. Ask questions like, “Do you think differently about adults in poverty vs. kids in poverty?” We’re not naive about the challenges. We see successful teachers focusing on kids’ assets, such as resilience and perseverance, and then provide the support they need so they can achieve.

Q. How do you get more schools to take the leap and start offering a more rigorous curriculum?

A. It usually begins with leaders—administrators and teacher-leaders. In almost all of the high performing/high poverty schools we researched, there is a sense of urgency. They all talk about the struggle to become a team and how people who didn’t believe usually left. They all tell stories of how they had to confront low expectations. They had to confront their own mental maps. ■

Learn more through their book Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools and their blogs on Edutopia.